

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

ENGLISH COMMENTARY ON

SECRETS OF THE SELF

اسرار خودی

DR. MUHAMMAD IQBAL

BY

DR. SALEEM A KHANANI MBBS, MD, MRCP (UK)

SHREWSBURY, MASSASCHUSETTS USA

CHAPTER TWO

An overview

After the prologue Mohammad Iqbal starts by stating that the basis of the organization of this universe is the Self or the self-realization. The word خودی will be translated mostly as the Self, and sometimes as Ego. The life of individuals depends on strengthening the self. Next he emphasizes that the life of the Self is dependent upon purposefulness. It consists of forming ideals and working towards their realization. Living without purpose is biologically speaking “living” but spiritually it is akin to death. Self is not being self-centric. A realization of self requires falling in love with the Highest Ideal. He describes love as the fountain of life. For him the true love is the love of Allah and then of the Holy Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him. He declares that in the Muslim’s heart is the home of Mohammad, peace be upon him, and that the glory of the Muslims is from the name of Mohammad peace be upon him. He idealizes the Prophet, peace be upon him by mentioning some incidents from his blessed life. The key to the doors of this world is through religion. Self-centeredness is lost in this love and strengthened by God the Muslim returns to his true Self, that is, he realizes his full potential and makes himself deserving of the title of God’s vicegerent on this earth.

Dependence on others weakens the Self. For Iqbal, an entire ocean, if gained by begging is but a sea of fire. He quotes Prophet Mohammad peace be upon, “God loves a man who earns his living by his own hands.”

Next he declares that when the Self is strengthened by true love it can conquer the external and internal forces of nature. The self becomes so powerful as if its hand were God’s hand. To illustrate his point he narrates an incident from the life of Shaikh Sharafuddin of Panipat, known popularly as Bu Ali Qalandar.

He then enters into a deep philosophical discourse. The negation of self (there is no existence) is a doctrine invented by nations that were subjugated at some point in their history in order to weaken the conquering nations. He describes an interesting tale of the sheep and the tigers. Sheep cannot turn into wolves but a furious tiger can be turned into a sheep. A false and

pretentious message of peace lulled a wakeful tiger into slumber. Iqbal describes this decline of the Self as civilization or in Dr. Nicholson's words, "moral culture".

In the first edition of the Secrets of the Self, Iqbal had criticized the mystic ideas of Hafiz Shirazi that he deleted from the second edition. However, he kept his criticism of Plato and Platonic ideas in it. He portrays Plato's philosophy in very obvious negative terms describing the Greek philosopher as a sheep in man's clothing for whom to die was the secret of life and who called the world of causes or phenomena as Nicholson translates a myth. Plato lacked ambition and dynamism and hence he refuted the idea of a material universe and instead put forth his theory of the invisible Ideas. He describes Plato's flight of ideas as a bird that soars too high never to return to its nest. In other words, his philosophy lacked reality.

Iqbal's next target is poetry itself. Real poetry has a purpose and it makes the blood of man warm. A poet whose words put his nation to sleep is a criminal. Such poets show beauty as ugliness; their poetry robs the rose of freshness (kills new spirit), takes away from the nightingale's heart the joy of flying (suppresses the spirit of adventure) and casts the ship to the bottom of sea (his followers are doomed to fail). Such poets are themselves sick and make others listless and "a disgrace to Islam throughout the world". Iqbal has launched a fearless attack on the contemporary Urdu and Persian poetry, and instead directs the Muslim poets to look at the Arabic poetry as a model. He tells them to go back to the Arabia and taste a little of the heat of the desert. Instead of sleeping on a bed of silk (composing only love poems and praising the kings and princes to gain monetary benefit) they should accustom themselves to the rough cotton.

The next (the 9th) section of this poem is described as its soul by Professor Chishti. Nicholson translates the title of this section as "Showing that the education of the Self has three stages: Obedience, Self-control, and Divine Vicegerency". The term that Iqbal uses for "the education of the Self" is تربیت خودی that could be better translated as the nurturing of the Self. The first stage of Obedience refers to the obedience to the Divine Commands as elucidated in the Holy Quran and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet

Mohammad, peace be upon him. To illustrate his point Iqbal gives the example of a camel praising certain of his characteristics such as service, hard work, patience and perseverance, the qualities the poet sees in the young Muslims of his time. By shouldering the burden of responsibility, with enough food to survive and little sleep, they will enjoy what the Holy Quran describes as

عَنْدَهُ حُسْنُ الْمَآبِ

“in nearness to Allah is the best of the goals (To return to)” (Yousuf Ali’s translation)

Obedience makes a man of no worth, worthy. In order to conquer the sun and the stars, Muslims must submit to the Divine authority and avoid transgressing the moral boundaries established by the Holy Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him.

Self-control refers to controlling the animal and basal desires to which all human beings are subject. He who is incapable of self-control surrenders himself to others. A man of Ego must not be afraid of anyone but Allah. Beautifully and tactfully does the poet weave the pillars of the Islamic faith into his discourse!

The next and the final step is the Divine Vicegerency. God’s vicegerent is the soul of the universe. As Nicholson explains, when the Ego is developed to its fullest, a human being becomes the Perfect man and all the Divine attributes become displayed in him, so that as saint or Prophet he is the God-man, the representative and vicegerent of God on earth. He then executes Allah’s commands in the world. This sounds very similar to the establishment of establishing the Kingdom of God in this world. The passage is replete with Quranic quotations and religious symbolism.

The next sections is a tribute to Ali (may Allah be pleased with him), the cousin of the Holy Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon. The idea is that in order to conquer the forces of nature Muslims must first control their own self. Incidents from the life of Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) are mentioned to drive this point home.

Whosoever in the world becomes a Bu Turab
The sun can turn back for him from the West

(Bu Turab is a title given to Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) by the Holy Prophet, peace be upon him.

In following the tradition of his mentor, Jalaluddin Rumi, Iqbal now proceeds to narrate four stories that will be discussed in details as we study the Mathnavi in detail.

The next section describes Iqbal's philosophy on Jihad (war against unbelievers to use Nicholson's translation). The purpose of the Muslim's life is to exalt the Word of Allah (Iqbal uses a Quranic terminology to his advantage.

وَكَلِمَةُ اللهِ هِيَ الْأَعْلَى

"the word of Allah is exalted to the heights" (translation by Yousuf Ali)

Warfare for the sake of grabbing lands is forbidden in the religion of Islam.

He who draws his sword for a purpose other than (exalting the word of Allah)

His sword shall rest in his own chest

Next follows an interesting section in which Iqbal give some precepts for the Muslims of India in the name of Mir Najat Makshband also known as Baba Sahrai, i.e., the saint of the desert. This is likely a pseudonym that Iqbal chose for himself.

A long section follows titled the Time is a sword, a deep philosophical discourse and one of Iqbal's favorite topics of study, his fascination with time.

As is the practice with Muslim writers, the Mathnavi ends with an invocation in which the poet makes a request to Allah to elevate the status of the Muslim nation. He makes a wish for a group of people who would understand and spread his message.

Or give me one old comrade

To be the mirror of mine all-burning love!

Ghulam Ahmad Pervez was one of Iqbal's disciples. A controversial figure accused of heresy by the orthodox scholars, Pervez was a prolific writer on religious philosophy and Quranic studies besides Iqbal studies. He wrote Urdu commentaries on three of Iqbal's Persian long poems, Mathnavis, including the Secrets of the Self. I am giving the English translation of a chapter in which he expounds his understanding of what Iqbal really meant by self?

This question cannot be answered in a few words since his entire philosophy revolves around the philosophy of self. Hence in order to understand Iqbal's concept of Self one has to study Iqbal's entire philosophy. The word خودی appears time and time again in Iqbal's poetry collection ضرب کلیم and it seems necessary to discuss a bird's eye view of Iqbal's unique interpretation of this term.

The issue revolves around an important question whether there is such a thing as human individuality, personality and Ego or is it simply an illusion? Throughout human history philosophers and thinkers in every age and in every land have tried to tackle it.

Plato and the followers of his philosophy in Iran and India reached the conclusion that there is only universal life. Individual life is nothing more than an illusion. This illusion is sustained through human activity and action. To get rid of this illusion man must give up all ambitions and all actions. The bubble of human individuality will then burst only to be absorbed in the Universal life. This extinction then becomes everlasting existence or in other words فنا في البقاء.

This should be the ultimate of life. The eastern philosophy of pantheism or وحدت الوجود is very similar to and perhaps a product of the Platonic ideology. Under the influence of the pantheistic philosophy the once dynamic Muslim community was lulled into a deep slumber.

Iqbal engaged in a constant protest against this philosophy of life and presented his philosophy of self. Its essence lies in individual rather than universal life so much so that even God is an individual, the most unique

individual. Self represents the ultimate form of this individual life that shapes human personality. The purpose of human life is not negation of individuality but its affirmation.

According to Iqbal the more a human being progresses towards becoming "like" the most unique and perfect individual the more he becomes unique and rare. This is the consolidation of the Self. Becoming like the most unique individual implies that the human begins to reflect the Divine attributes and internalizes the Ultimate Ego.

The criterion of determining the weakening or strengthening of the Self is how a human being overcomes the challenges encountered in his life. The greatest obstacle in the way of life is matter and materialism. This does not mean that matter is evil and hence an object of hatred. Matter is not evil but a means of materializing the hidden forces of life.

When the human Ego grows stronger by overcoming challenges of life then the shock of death cannot do it any harm. The human life thus achieves immortality. Every action that strengthened Ego is good. Conversely whatever weakens it is evil.

According to Iqbal the first step in the evolution of the Self is the generation of desire or establishment of a purpose in life. Desire or purposefulness is the real force since it generates action.

The next step is constant struggle for the attainment of objectives. This struggle creates a feeling of restlessness and burning with desire for the sake of achievements. In Iqbal's terminology it is عشق (for which love is but a poor literal translation). The success of this mission depends upon three conditions. The first and foremost is obedience to the Divine Law or a complete submission to the Quran that necessitates the establishment of a society whose foundation is the Quran. Obedience leads to self-control that is the second condition. It does not imply suppression of (legal) desires but a redirection of additional forces towards establishing balance. The most perfect example of this balance is seen in God with respect to the Divine attributes (where Mercy is balanced by Wrath, and Power is balanced by Forbearance).

The purification of thought and action thus acquired leads to a spiritual refinement through which Man becomes the Divine Vicegerent. This is the third condition.

The divine vicegerency does not mean that man becomes a deputy of God since God is always present. It implies the capacity for establishing and implementing the Divine Law in this world. This is the highest status of a believer and the pinnacle of the realization of the Self. Here the Man controls the world; the world does not control him.

At various places in his poetry Iqbal uses different terms for this high state such as فقر, درویشی قلندری (استغناء) reflecting the Divine attributes of صمدیت and غنی عن العالمین (God is not dependent upon anything or anyone but everything depends upon Him.) The group of such (perfect) individuals is the Muslim Nation أمت مسلمة whose revival is Iqbal's ultimate aim.